

# THIRUKKURAL EXPRESS



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Prof.R.P.Sethu Pillai

2 March 1896-[Rajavallipuram] 25 April 1961

A beacon in a time of declining cultural values.

Sethu pillai was born at Rajavallipuram, Tirunelveli District in 1896. He was educated and practiced as a lawyer. He became interested in Tamil after listening to a speech of Maraimalai Adigal at Palayamkottai in June 1912. After a brief career in politics (he was the Vice Chairman of the Tirunelveli Municipal Council), he became a teacher. During 1930-36, he taught at Annamalai University. In 1936, he became a senior lecturer at the Madras University. In 1946, he succeeded Prof. Vaiyapuri Pillai as the Reader of Tamil and the Head of the Tamil department in the University. In 1948, the readership was converted to a full professorship and he became Professor of Tamil. From 1946 till his death in 1961 he was the Head of the Tamil department. In 1955, he won the first ever Sahitya Akademi Award for Tamil for his series of essays titled Tamil inbam. In 1957, he was awarded a D. Litt. Degree (Honoris causa). Sethu pillai was a scholar of Tamil and wrote more than twenty five books. Among his notable works is his biography of Bishop Robert Caldwell titled Caldwell Aiyar Sarithram. He was popularly called Sollin Selvar for his proficiency in Tamil. He was a member of the Tamil advisory board for the Sahitya Akademi since its inception in 1954. He was involved in the creation of the Tamil encyclopaedia and the last volume of the Tamil lexicon. He also wrote a number of books and articles in English. The most noted among them is his edition of Francis Whyte Ellis' commentary of Tirukkural and Dravidian comparative vocabulary. Sethu pillai died in 1961. In 2009, Sethu Pillai's works were nationalised by the Government of Tamil Nadu.

## Feminist perspectives in Thirukkural-an outline

Feminist perspectives encompass a diverse range of theories and beliefs aimed at understanding and addressing the unequal power dynamics and discrimination based on gender. While there are various feminist perspectives, some fundamental concepts include:



**Gender Inequality:** Feminism recognizes that society men over women, leading to disparities in areas such as employment, education, politics, and social roles.

**Intersectionality:** This concept acknowledges that gender discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Intersectional feminism understand and address these overlapping systems of discrimination.

**Patriarchy:** Feminism critiques patriarchal systems, which prioritize male dominance and control over societal institutions and norms. It aims to dismantle these structures to create more equitable societies.

**Agency and Choice:** Feminism supports women's autonomy and agency, advocating for their right to make choices about their bodies, careers, relationships, and lives free from coercion or societal pressure.

**Representation and Media Critique:** Feminist perspectives often analyze how women are portrayed in media and popular culture, challenging stereotypes and promoting more diverse and realistic representations of women's experiences.

**Social Construction of Gender:** Feminism challenges the idea that gender is biologically determined, arguing instead that it is socially constructed. This perspective highlights how societal norms and expectations shape individuals' experiences of gender.

**Global Perspective:** Feminism recognizes that gender inequality is a global issue, affecting women and marginalized genders around the world. It emphasizes solidarity and collaboration across borders to address these issues.

Empowerment and Liberation: Feminism seeks to empower women and marginalized genders, working towards their liberation from oppressive systems and the realization of their full potential.

These are just some of the foundational principles of feminist perspectives, which continue to evolve and adapt to address new challenges and realities facing women and gender minorities.

Thirukkural, a classical Tamil text written by Thiruvalluvar, offers insights into various aspects of life, including ethics, morality, and social conduct. While it was written over two millennia ago, some of its teachings can resonate with modern feminist perspectives, although it's important to note that Thirukkural reflects the cultural context of its time.

Here are some ways in which Thirukkural aligns with certain feminist principles:

**Equality and Justice:** Thirukkural emphasizes the importance of treating all individuals equally and justly, irrespective of their gender. For example, it promotes fair treatment in relationships and governance, advocating for respect and dignity for all.

**Education and Empowerment:** Thirukkural values education and knowledge, highlighting their importance in empowering individuals. This aligns with feminist goals of promoting education for women and marginalized groups to enhance their autonomy and opportunities.

**Respect for Women:** Thirukkural contains verses that emphasize the respect and honor due to women. It acknowledges their contributions to society and stresses the importance of treating them with dignity and equality.

**Critique of Patriarchy:** While not explicitly framed in feminist terms, Thirukkural contains verses that critique oppressive power structures and advocate for ethical governance and social harmony. These teachings can be interpreted as challenging patriarchal norms and promoting more egalitarian values.

However, it's also important to recognize that Thirukkural reflects the historical and cultural context of ancient Tamil society, which may not fully align with modern feminist perspectives. For example, the text contains some verses that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations.

Additionally, Thirukkural's focus on virtue, morality, and duty may not encompass the broader scope of contemporary feminist discourse, which includes intersectionality, systemic analysis, and activism for social change. In summary, while Thirukkural may contain teachings that resonate with certain feminist principles, it's not a comprehensive feminist text. It reflects its own historical context and can be interpreted in various ways, including through a feminist lens, to extract insights relevant to contemporary gender equality and justice movements.

-----Maraimalai Ilakkuvanar

## Periyar E.V.R.-The forerunner for Feminist activism

"A close analysis of the conduct of our close relatives, friends or acquaintances will show us instances of their bad dealings and dishonest ways," writes Periyar.

Born in Tamil Nadu in 1879, Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, famously called Periyar, was the tallest revolutionary of his time who used logic to enquire about human nature and relationships. He used rationalism to propose a theory of knowledge through his books and writings vis-a-vis methodological questioning of existing social norms with a sensitivity to the disadvantaged. A social reformer, activist, politician, and holder of equality and justice, Periyar is widely known for the 'Self Respect Movement' and as the Father of the Dravidian Movement.

Periyar's readiness to welcome modernity in light of the emancipation of people, especially the oppressed castes, classes and women, makes him unique from other reformers of his times. The works of Periyar, which are subjected to scholarly scrutiny, include a critique of Brahmanism, the idea of atheism, an analysis and rationalist rejection of religion, journey in politics. It seems appalling that students and even teachers of the Philosophy department of leading Universities of India sail through undergraduate curricula, sometimes postgraduate as well, without ever having read Periyar's philosophy. Rene Descartes, a philosophical propagator of posing systemic doubt on lifelong accumulated beliefs to discover the truth, would have loved to engage with Periyar's rationalist approach in the Indian socio-political context.

Liberty of Women to Love-Desire

In her book 'Against the Madness of Manu' Sharmila Rege writes, "Within women's studies, pluralism has come to mean a relative absence of debate and thus a 'peaceful co-existence' between those who 'do caste' and those who do not- as if caste were a matter of choice for those doing gender". Her observation pointed out the negligence of feminists and those doing women's studies in investing efforts to reclaim Dr. B. R. Ambedakar in feminist epistemology. A similar denial can be seen within academia and feminist circles when we observe how rarely the feminists have reclaimed Periyar's feminist orientation in their theory of knowledge.

'Collected works of Periyar E.V.R.', compiled by Dr. K Veeramani, record speeches, interviews, and opinion pieces that tell the readers about Periyar's thoughts about various topics. Social and economic equality between the sexes and the radical concept of sexual freedom for women is central to his idea of liberty.

Periyar's philosophy of equality in 'the personal' is reflected in his idea of self-respect marriages, a significant social change introduced as a part of the 'Self Respect Movement'. He imagines self-respect marriage as a rational marriage that doesn't require a Brahmin priest or an auspicious day; it is instead a "compassionate agreement" between the partners. In 1932 Periyar made a trip to the Soviet Union; he observed and wrote about the nature of companionship. Periyar used logic and

reason based on his experiences, so it can be said that he used rationalism and empiricism to form his epistemic work.

In his idea of 'Family Partnership,' Periyar advocates for a marriage whose nature is rather like that of a well-thought and planned arrangement between two individuals who "like each other and desire to become life partners".

The "mental calibre, love towards one another, their experiences, their vision of future life" are more important rather than the Sanskrit mantras and the Brahmin priests, caste identity, astrologer's prediction about the day of marriage and the position of celestial bodies. He is a staunch supporter of the right to choose partners and partnerships out of love and free will.

"Chastity and love have been used to subordinate women and subject them to men's control", he writes.

Periyar's idea of family, companionship and philosophy of love recognises women as equal individuals; he believes in "all things for all".

.Periyar can also be read from the 'philosophy of love' standpoint, which democratises the idea of love. He rejects force in love. He seems to be impressed by what he observed in Russia; he recalls those imprints in his writings: partners kissing each other before leaving for work, writing each other notes when dealing with rough days of dislike.

Children, Family and their Impact on Women

"I would say that marriage takes place to make a woman a slave to man'...' Marriages are for selfish ends", Periyar writes.

He is upset and questions the condition of 50 per cent of society's population. A society of his imagination is well-educated, healthy and mindful. However, the absence of family planning and birth control are the barriers to such achievement.

He lays down the reasons for the need for birth control. A big family seizes the opportunity for quality life for not only the parents but also the children. Women's health is at risk when she has to give birth to children frequently, one after the other. "A woman should recoup her health before she conceives again", he writes. The minimum age of marriage was 22 for women to the idea that early conceiving leads to the seizure of pleasure for the married couple; Periyar had a reason-driven approach about how and what a family must be. He was a supporter of widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. His writings in this context are a critical and brilliant intervention in India's moral and social foundations.-[A part of the Essay on Feminist Philosophies of Periyar]

About the author:Aishwarya is a philosophy student and a freelance journalist. Born in Bihar, they read to escape existential dilemmas and write to express themselves.

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## Questions and Answers in Thirukkural

: Thirukkural Dr. R. Prabhakaran

### 69.1 Envoy

(69.1 தூது)

Question:

What are the essential qualities of an envoy?

Answer:

Love, intelligence, and astute eloquence are the three essential qualities of an envoy. (Couplet – 682)

அன்பறிவு ஆராய்ந்த சொல்வன்மை தூதுரைப்பார்க்கு  
இன்றி யமையாத மூன்று. (குறள் – 682)

Explanation:

As stated in Couplet 682, love, intelligence, and eloquence are the three essential qualities of an envoy. Here, love implies the envoy's love of his country. To be a good envoy, one should be a patriot so that he will do the right things for his country. To understand complex and intricate political issues, the envoy must be intelligent. In situations where the envoy must argue in favor of his country, he should be quick-witted and eloquent in his speech.

### 69.2 Envoy

(69.2 தூது)

Question:

Who is an excellent candidate to be an envoy of a country?

Answer:

A person with intelligence, an impressive personality, and researched learning is fit to become an envoy. (Couplet – 684)

அறிவுரு வாராய்ந்த கல்விஇம் மூன்றன்  
செறிவுடையான் செல்க வினைக்கு. (குறள் – 684)

Explanation:

A senior envoy who goes on a critical diplomatic mission to a foreign country that



could be a potential enemy should be vested with sufficient power to act on behalf of his country. Such an envoy should be intelligent enough to handle potential conflicts. Also, his impressive personality and depth of knowledge will be an added asset for handling difficult situations. Many ambassadors from different countries are known for possessing the qualities mentioned in Couplet 684 and have served their countries admirably. Among them, two of them are worth mentioning. One is Benjamin Franklin, who served as the US ambassador to France from 1776 to 1785. Benjamin Franklin was a polymath who was active as a scientist, inventor, statesman, diplomat, printer, publisher, and political philosopher. Among the leading intellectuals of his time, Franklin was one of the United States Founding Fathers and a drafter and signer of the United States Declaration of Independence. As ambassador to France, he conducted his country's affairs toward France successfully, including securing a critical military alliance in 1778 and signing the 1783 Treaty of Paris.

Among the many Indian ambassadors to many countries over the years, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was remarkable in many respects. He was a scholar, philosopher, and writer known for his depth of knowledge. He had been a professor of philosophy and delivered lectures at many universities, including Oxford and Harvard. He also served as the Vice Chancellor of Andhra University. When India became independent in 1947, Radhakrishnan represented India at UNESCO (1946–52) and was later Ambassador of India to the Soviet Union from 1949 to 1952. He was also elected to the Constituent Assembly of India. Radhakrishnan was elected as the first vice president of India in 1952 and was elected as the second president of India (1962–1967). Dr. Radhakrishnan had a commanding presence and was a man of wisdom.

### 69.3 Envoy

(69.3 தூது)

Question:

How can an envoy be successful in his diplomatic mission?

Answer:

Conciseness of speech, eschewing harsh words, and a sense of humor produce good results from diplomatic missions. (Couplet – 685)

தொகச் சொல்லித் துவாத நீக்கி நகச்சொல்லி

நன்றி பயப்பதாந் தூது. (குறள் – 685)

Explanation:

According to Valluvar, if an envoy is precise in his speech, uses pleasant words, and has a sense of humor, he will be successful in his mission. Puranaanuru, part of Sangam Literature, mentions a famous example of a very successful poet in her

diplomatic mission. About 2000 years ago, there was a king by the name of Adhiyaman(அதியமான் ) in Tamil Nadu, India. He was known for his courage and generosity.

The poet Avvaiyaar (அவ்வையார்) was the poet laureate in Adhiyaman's kingdom. In addition to her official role as a poet and a minister, she was also a close friend of Adhiyaman. Adhiyaman had won several wars during his time. But there was a king by the name of Thondaiman in Adhiyaman's neighboring country. Thondaiman was very jealous of Adhiyaman and was ready to wage war against Adhiyaman. Although Adhiyaman was sure he could defeat Thondaiman, he was not interested in fighting with Thondaiman. Adhiyaman sent the poet Avvaiyaar on a diplomatic mission to Thondaiman.

Avvaiyaar's mission was to discourage Thondaiman from waging war with Adhiyaman. When Avvaiyaar reached Thondaiman's court, Thondaiman was very nice to her. He wanted to impress Avvaiyaar with his collection of weapons. He escorted Avvaiyaar to his armory and showed his impressive armaments. Avvaiyaar told him, "Wow! Your weapons are so new, and they are shining so well. They are adorned with peacock feathers, encircled by garlands, have strong, thick, well-fashioned shafts, and are anointed with ghee. They repose in a sprawling, well-guarded palace. Those (Adhiyaman's) spears with their blades and joints were broken when they pierced enemies and are always found in the blacksmith's small shed. Thondaiman immediately realized that Adhiyaman's weapons have been used in many wars and brought him victory, whereas his weapons are so new that even his soldiers may not know how to use them effectively. Thondaiman became skeptical of his chances of victory in a war against Adhiyaman and dropped the idea of waging war against Adhiyaman.1. Hart, George L, Heifetz. The four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom (1999). Columbia Univerdsitry Press, New York,

As Valluvar mentions in Couplet 685, Avvaiyaar was precise in her speech, used pleasant words, and with her satirical sense of humor, she intimidated Thondaiman, and he dropped the idea of war. Her diplomatic mission was a great success.

